

Materialist Thought in Early Tamil Literature

Author(s): N. Vanamamalai

Source: *Social Scientist*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (Nov., 1973), pp. 25-41

Published by: [Social Scientist](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3516360>

Accessed: 08-02-2016 19:04 UTC

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



*Social Scientist* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Social Scientist*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

N VANAMAMALAI

## *Materialist Thought in Early Tamil Literature*

IDEALIST as well as Marxist scholars have directed their efforts at reconstructing materialist thought from the dim mist of Indian antiquity. Das Gupta, Dakshin Narayan Sastry, and Chakravarthi Nayanar are among those of the idealist persuasion who tapped Sanskrit sources for their investigations. They exhibited a marked preference for *Advaita*. Using the very same sources Debi Prasad Chattopadhyaya and K Damodaran also attempted to reconstruct ancient Indian materialism, but employing the Marxist approach. In the absence of original texts of ancient materialist philosophy written by materialists, all these scholars had to go in for the exposition of materialism contained in the statements of materialism's opponents in both the vedic and non-vedic systems. Such a method was unavoidable as no original text written by teachers of the *Lokayata* school was available for study. In the reconstruction of ancient Indian materialism, it is particularly noticeable that the South Indian sources have been comparatively unexplored. Neither has any scholar yet examined the ancient Tamil literary sources to seek materialist trends and to set them alongside the *Purvapaksha* description of materialism in the Sanskrit sources.

This paper aims at examining certain imprints and descriptions of materialist thought found in ancient Tamil literature. Unfortunately

there is no readymade philosophical treatise of the period preserved and handed down to us. We have, therefore, to turn to literary texts and mainly to *Purananuru* and *Pattupattu*, anthologies of poetry on the secular life of the Tamils between the second century B C and the third century A D.

Philosophical disputations of the various schools of metaphysics are recorded in Buddhist and Jain works of a later period, that is, between the third and ninth centuries A D. In these, materialist thought called *Bhutavada* and *Lokayata* is taken up for censure and attack. This paper will also examine the account of *Lokayata* in the Buddhist work, *Manimekalai*, and in the Jain text *Neelakesi*. The period after the ninth century A D is outside the compass of this study.

Chakravarthi Nayanar in his introduction to *Neelakesi* has this to say about *Bhutavada* in Tamil Nadu :

There lived in Nalanda near Rajgriha a Brahmin named Madhava. He had a son named Koshtilla and a daughter named Sari. Koshtilla went to South India to study *Bhutavada*. Sari married a Brahmin from Southern India called Tishya. She had a son named Upatishya called so after his father. He had another son named after his mother Sariputta. In a village nearby, there was a purohit whose wife Modgal bore a son. He was called Moggalana. Both Sariputta and Moggalana studied under Sanjaya. Hearing about Buddha, they went to meet him. They joined the Buddhist order.

Chakravarthi Nayanar, himself a Jain, mentions that *Bhutavada* or *Lokayata* was taught in the South in the sixth century B C and that these schools of thought attracted scholars from the North. Dakshin Narayan Sastry and Chakravarthi Nayanar also admit that *Lokayata* was one of the earliest systems of thought prevalent in the South. But they did not collect evidence for their conclusions from Tamil or other South Indian sources. The chronology of the literatures of the southern languages with the exception of Tamil cannot be assigned to a period earlier than the tenth century A D. Only *Sangam* literature in Tamil is assigned to a period ranging from the second century B C to the third century A D. It is, therefore, reasonable to look for traces of early materialist thought in *Sangam* works of this period and in Jain and Buddhist works of the period closely following the *Sangam* age.

### *Nature of the Sources*

To get a clear idea of the nature of the sources, one should know the purport of the themes of the *Sangam* works. It can be said that all books of the *Sangam* literature are anthologies of compositions of different poets belonging to different periods, and classified into two main genres *Aham* and *Puram*. *Aham* poetry is devoted to pre-marital and post-marital love while *Puram* poetry deals with social life in all its aspects. As this study is centred mainly on *Purananuru*<sup>2</sup>, it is pertinent to highlight the theme of this book as representative of the *Sangam* literature.

*Purananuru* is an anthology of poems numbering 400. We get

in its scenes of social life of the Tamils from the second century B C to the third century A D. The poems pursue purely secular themes such as the life of the tribal people of the hills; agricultural groups of the river valley regions; their tribal wars; the wars of the tribal chiefs against rising feudal monarchs; cattle-rearing; panegyrics addressed to the chieftains by the folk minstrels (*Panars*); ethical precepts addressed to rulers and to people in general and a host of other themes directly related to the social life of the period. Going through this work we can conclude that tribal life was disintegrating and feudal states were just emerging. The later poems of the anthology speak about three kingdoms, the Chera, Chola and Pandya, with all the rivalries and wars among them. That leads us to the conclusion that by the time the later poems were composed tribal life had been destroyed as a whole in the Tamil country, except in the remote mountain fastnesses which lay out of reach of the mainland. Even to these remote hills, the *Panars* (folk minstrels) and *Viraliars* (folk danseuses) went carrying their song and dance. *It was a period of detribalisation leading to the emergence of feudalism.*

The nature of the first source has been characterised. Here one looks for answers to the questions: What do the poets think of life? Is it real or illusory? What is their conception of happiness? What is their idea of cosmogony? What ethical precepts do they express? Such questions are discussed by many of the poets in a casual manner, while they address their songs to the people in general or to someone in particular.

The second source consists of two epics, *Manimekalai* and *Neelakesi*, Buddhist and Jain respectively in their religious inspiration. In addition to the stories related in these epics, there is a chapter in each devoted to the philosophical and religious systems of the period. The first epic may be assigned to the third century A D; the second was written later, sometime between the fifth and ninth century A D. Each contains a description of *Bhutavada* (materialism). The account in *Manimekalai* is the first systematic account of materialism in Tamil sources, even though it is in the *Purvapaksha* form, that is, the statement of a system by its opponent.

*Manimekalai* has a commentary attached to it by a learned commentator of the medieval age. He gives valuable information on various schools of *Lokayata* and systems of logic which dominated the scene at the time. Though a few centuries separate the age of the commentator from that of the author of the epic, his learned commentary throws a flood of light on the state of materialist thought at the time of the epic and in later centuries. I have made use of these sources and compared their views with certain North Indian sources, both vedic and Jain, where distortions and differences in the description of the categories of *Lokayata* are noticeable.

### *The Content of the Puram Poems*

To return to the broad classification of the themes of the *Sangam* anthologies such as *Aham* and *Puram*, the material that finds a place under each of these heads is only life on earth. Very few poems mention life

after death, though there is an Elyseum called *Thevar Ulagu*, literally the World of the Gods. An overwhelming majority of the *Puram* poems speak about life on earth and how to make it happy. The early Tamil poets thought of domestic bliss within the (external) social set-up as the highest ideal of human life. Even after the rise of private property and the state, Thiruvalluvar set forth three ideals for the human condition : ethical life, acquisition of wealth and a happy love life. He taught that a good ethical life on earth, if combined with wealth, will lead to happiness. He was opposed to the theory that renunciation of worldly life guaranteed happiness in the next world. The ideal of *Moksha* called *Veedu* in Tamil, was not advocated by Thiruvalluvar. *Sangam* and later poems also contain a robust affirmation of life under the sun.

What prompted the life-affirming materialistic outlook reflected in the *Puram* anthology? Why did the later literature incline towards a religious outlook of denying the reality of life on earth and upholding the ideal of a better life in another world, or, in other words, a state of absolute renunciation of desires and passions?

The period of composition of the poems of *Puram* extended over five centuries or more. This was a period of detribalisation of the hunting and pastoral tribes and the emergence of private property, feudalism and the state. *The rapid change in the social formation leading to class society on the one hand and non-class tribal society on the other, existing side by side, led to a contradiction between the tribal ideology and the emerging feudal ideology of religion and god.*

### *Effect of Detribalisation*

Debi Prasad Chattopadhyaya has this to say about the incomplete detribalisation of tribal life and the consequent change in the modes of thought of the people :

If therefore it is true that the life of the Indian masses remained detribalised only incompletely, then the sources of their dominant world outlook should logically be sought in the beliefs and ideas of the tribal peoples though the original significance of this world outlook, like that of the tribal survivals themselves, must have passed into its opposite. What interests us most is the original nature of this world outlook. We are going to argue that it must have been instinctively materialistic or proto-materialistic — the collective labour of the tribal life being a guarantee of that. Interestingly, surviving as it did in the lives of the working masses, this proto-materialistic character was not completely lost from the popular 'Weltanschauung' called the *Lokayata*.<sup>4</sup>

From this, it is clear why there was a materialistic life-affirming outlook among the early poets of the *Puram* anthology. The materialist world outlook, which had its origin in the collective labour of pre-class society, persisted even after the partial destruction of its basis and the emergence of a different basis.

### *Origin of Idealism*

As for the second part of the question raised above, Engels pointed out :

From tribes there developed nations and states. Law and politics arose and with them the phantastic reflection of human things in the human mind — religion. In the face of all these creations which appeared in the first place to the products of the mind and which seemed to dominate the human societies, the more modest productions of the working hand retreated into the background, the more so since the mind that planned the labour process already at a very early stage of the development of society was able to have this planned labour carried out by other hands than its own. All merit to the swift advance of civilisation was ascribed to the mind and to the development and activity of the brain. Men became accustomed to explain their actions from their thoughts instead of from their needs, and so there arose in course of time that idealistic outlook on the world which especially since the downfall of the ancient world has dominated man's mind.<sup>5</sup>

And again,

Division of labour only became truly such from the moment when a division of material and mental labour appears. From this moment onwards, consciousness can really flatter itself that it is something without conceiving something real, from now on consciousness is in a position to emancipate itself from the world and to proceed to the formation of pure theory, theology, philosophy, ethics etc.<sup>6</sup>

In the light of these formulations by Marx and Engels, I propose to examine in the literary sources of the *Sangam* age the following :

- (i) the life-affirming materialistic outlook of the ancient Tamil poets;
- (ii) the materialistic conception of the origin of the universe on the basis of the theory of the five primary elements;
- (iii) some aspects of their ethics, and
- (iv) the reconstruction of their theory of epistemology from the statements attributed to *Lokayatas* by the Buddhist and Jain poets who flourished in the period closely following the *Sangam* age.

Now to the first question : What is the conception of the ideal life according to the poets of the *Puram* anthology ? Let us take a few examples from *Puram* poets which illustrate the poet's conception of a life of happiness :

He embraced the shoulders of his beloved one,  
 Wore garlands of flowers gathered from an odorous park,  
 Smeared his chest with sandal paste,  
 Destroyed his enemies,  
 Supported his friends,  
 Never bowed to the mighty.  
 He never trampled upon the weak,  
 Never betrayed his adherents.

He annihilated invading armies, and routed his enemies.  
 He rode his chariot drawn by fast steeds,  
 He rode upon his royal elephant.  
 He treated minstrels with delicious food and sweet wine,  
 Spoke to them gentle words of warm affection.  
 He lived a perfect and ideal life.  
 Burn him or bury him :  
 Dispose of his body in whatever manner you like.  
 It does not matter to him how you do it after his death.<sup>7</sup>

This is a poem composed by Pereyil Muruvalar on the death of his friend, Namby Neduncheliyan, a king of the Pandya dynasty. The conception of the ideal life contained in these lines is suffused with a materialistic outlook on life. This world is real. The problems of this material world must be solved. Man should not try to escape from them, thinking that the world is an appearance and reality is beyond his grasp.

The desire to lead a happy life and to be youthful and energetic stirred all ancient people. It led them into efforts to discover the 'elixir of life'. Ancient *Siddhas* and *Tantrikas* were also engaged in the pursuit of *Amrita Dhara* and deluded themselves that they had discovered it in their heads as a result of *Tantrika* practices. By contrast, we have a poem in the *Puram* anthology in which the poet offers a prescription for a youthful energetic life on earth, till death puts an end to it.

Pisir Aanthaiar, a poet, paid a visit to his friend, Ko Perum Cholan (King of the Chola country). The poet, despite his advanced age, appeared youthful and energetic. The king asked him about the secret of his youthfulness. Why had not a single hair on his head turned grey? Why were there no wrinkles on his forehead?

You ask me why my hair has not turned grey in spite of my old age?  
 My noble wife and children are wise.  
 My younger relatives cooperate with me.  
 My king protects us from evil things.  
 Many wise men who are humble and gentle live in my village.<sup>8</sup>

The secret of youthfulness, according to this poet, lies not in the practice of *Tantrika Yoga*, the realisation of 'soul' or other mental disciplines, but in amity among all those who live with one. This explanation arises out of a materialist outlook on life. The presumption is strengthened by the name of the poet, Pisir Athan Thanthaiar (Pisir : name of village, Athan Thanthaiar : father of Athan). T N Subramaniam<sup>9</sup> finds the word, *Aathan*, mentioned in *Thevaram* along with *Samanar* (Jain ascetics). Both *Samanar* and *Aathar* were supposed by commentators to refer to the *Digambara* sect of Jain ascetics. But *Thevaram* denounces *Aathar* as fish-eaters and liquor addicts. Subramaniam rightly points out that *Aathar* could not refer to *Digambaras*, who abstained from non-vegetarian food; it could refer only to a settlement of *Ajivikas*. The adherents of this school were called *Aptha*, which in Tamil would be *Aathan*. There were very strong elements of materialism, such as the theory of *Pancha Bhutas* and



the movement of the world due to the motion of atoms, in the *Ajivika* system. Moreover, *Aathan* is certainly not a Brahmin name. We can reasonably suppose that this poet was influenced by the ancient *Lokayata* directly, or through *Ajivika* thought.

Let us now turn to another genre of poems, known as *aarrupadai* in the *Puram* anthology. The general theme of this class of poems is the advice given to a needy and hungry folk minstrel, going in search of a patron, by another who is returning after receiving bountiful gifts from a chief or ruler. The latter praises his patron and advises the former to go to him and sing his praise in order to receive rich gifts. In such poems, the last part is a blessing to the benefactor. We find in poems of a later period the poet invoking gods and goddesses to bless the kings. The poet calls upon Siva, Vishnu or Durga to send his or her choicest blessings to his patron. *Puram* poets do not seek the help of gods or goddesses, but themselves bless their patrons. They do not arrogate to themselves the functions of a pontiff or *Shaman*. The blessing is an expression of gratitude to the donor, who has relieved them of their suffering. It is thus a moot question whether these poets believed in the intervention of a god or goddess in the affairs of human life. The poems indicate (indirectly and sometimes directly) that they did not believe in divine intervention.

Let me cite some illustrations of verses of blessings of this type. The author of this poem is Nedumaran and the patron is Mudukudumipperu-Vazhuti, a Pandyan king :

Long live Kudumi  
Who gave gold and water to the minstrels,  
Who celebrates the festival of the sea  
Let his years of life be as many  
As the sands on the bed of the river Pahruli.<sup>10</sup>

This is in praise of Chola Nalankilli by the poet Thamarpalkarmanar :

May your years (of life)  
Extend like sands on the seashore.<sup>11</sup>

Nanmaran, a Pandyan king, is praised by the poet Maruthur Ilanaganar. It is to be noted that although the god, Murugan, is referred to, his blessing is not invoked :

May your years be as many as the sands  
Washed by the foam-topped waves  
On the shores of the eastern sea  
Where stands the God Neduvel.<sup>12</sup>

In another poem, the poet compares his patron to Kalan, the god of death; Balarama; Murugan in his fury against enemies; valour in battle; and fame among kings. Then follows a blessing :

Decorate suppliant minstrels in gold ornaments,  
Drink fragrant wine brought by Yavanas  
From the hands of pretty young maidens,  
Remain happy for years and years.<sup>13</sup>



The above discussion shows that these ancient Tamil poets were this-worldly, considered this world to be real, held that happiness had to be sought here and that this happiness should be related to the social ethics of the period. All these point to a materialistic outlook. Although a consistent system of thought was not worked out, these thoughts arose out of a particular world outlook which was essentially materialistic.

### *The Origin of the Universe*

The materialistic outlook of the early poets is also evident in their conception of the components out of which this world is made and also how life arose out of material elements. Dakshin Narayan Sastry distinguishes the schools of *Lokayatas* on the basis of whether they believed in four or five elements constituting the material universe. He believes that originally the *Lokayatas* believed in five elements and that later, owing to the onslaught of the idealist schools of thought, they revised the theory of elements and accepted four. The original belief was that the universe consisted of earth, water, fire and air, to which they later added *akasa*, sky or ether. Referring to this, Sastry says,

*Akasa* is not an element. Only four elements are perceived. These elements are in atomic condition when mixed together in the proper proportion and according to a certain order become living organisms.<sup>14</sup>

In *Puram* poems, both these suggestions find confirmation. Some poems mention four and some other five elements. What matters here is not the number but the nature of these elements. There is no doubt that these elements were conceived of as material substances. A *Puram* song has the following lines :

The sea with three-fold sources of water,  
The broad earth, the wind that blows,  
The empty sky, all these can be measured, but not your greatness.<sup>15</sup>

This poem is meant as a panegyric to a chieftain. It describes four elements and their unlimited magnitude of power. The sky is left out. Another poem mentions all five :

The world packed with solid earth,  
The sky above the earth,  
The wind that blows under the sky,  
The fire that is on the head of the air,  
Water opposed to fire.  
These are the five elements,  
Each with its peculiar nature.<sup>16</sup>

This poem mentions the five elements as opposites and related to each other. It also mentions that the five elements possess their peculiar natures and properties. The nature of the earth is solidity. The sky is ethereal and is above the earth. Something divides these two elements. Between the earth and the sky is another material element, different from the two but with its own peculiar properties. Air is necessary for fire to arise. Water and fire are contraries. A generalisation is made after

enumerating the five elements and their properties : each has its property and all together have a general nature, *Iyarkai* or *Svabhava*.

### *The Rise of Mythology*

As opposed to this theory, the theory of the creation of these five elements by an all-powerful god emerges in the later period of the anthology. It is an effort to deny the theory of *Svabhava*, which causes all movements of the universe including consciousness. The motion of the universe or the movement of consciousness does not presuppose a creator or a universal cause which motivates all movement. The *Lokayata* view of consciousness is explained by Dakshin Narayan Sastry thus :

Consciousness is a function of the body. Consciousness does not inhere in particles of matter. When these particles come to be arranged into specific forms they are found to have signs of life.<sup>17</sup>

Life and consciousness are identical. Our thinking power is destroyed with the dissolution of the elements by whose combination it is evolved. When the body perishes, consciousness perishes too. There is nothing to transmigrate. Behaviour is explained as due to external stimulation, as much as the closing or opening of the lotus is due to the presence or absence of the sun. There is no creator.

After the rise of property and the state and after the leisured class had come on the scene, the theory of the creation of the world was promulgated. But the creator was conceived of as the creator of the five elements, and not as the creator of the universe and the living beings. The crude attempt to explain the origin of the universe not by the combination of the five elements, but by superimposing a higher power over them, is exposed at the outset when we read the lines :

The great one who wields the axe created water, earth, fire, air and the sky. He is the leader of those with unwinking eyes and spotless bodies. They wear unfading flower garlands. They eat fragrant food.<sup>18</sup>

The great one is Siva: he wields the axe. Siva is an anthropomorphic conception. He is the leader of a group of gods. To distinguish them from human beings, they are described as possessing spotless bodies and unwinking eyes. It is strange, however, that they need food to stay alive. They are merely a tribal unit transferred to a different world, called god's world. Without completely severing itself from its tribal moorings, this conception of a creator of five elements arises. Lines found in *Maduraikanchi*<sup>19</sup> a long work that can be assigned to the first century A D also illustrate this conception.

When the question of food is raised, we must again turn to the *Puram* poets to understand its importance and its relation to the elements and to life. A poet advises a king to provide irrigation for the lands in his dominion, stating why he should do so :

The shape of food is food,  
Food is water and earth.

When water and earth combine  
 Then body and life arise.  
 After sowing, if the land depends  
 On the mercy of the sky, the king owning such land  
 Will not live in prosperity.<sup>20</sup>

The first lines read like a puzzle. The puzzle is solved when we read a line in *Manimekalai* which uses the same words and explains it thus: "The body of man is the shape of food."<sup>21</sup> The shape of food means the human body. Food itself, the poet explains, is a combination of two elements, water and earth. It calls upon the king to provide conditions for the combination of these two elements. Here there is no mention of a creator or the mercy of the gods. Man can produce food by knowing the *Svabhava* of elements and intervene to produce conditions for their combination to attain his set goal, namely, the production of foodgrains.

### *The Rise of Class Society*

After complete detribalisation, the feudal mode of production made rapid advance and engulfed the whole of ancient Tamil Nadu. It brought in its train the class conflict between the landowners and the dispossessed tribes. While production increased, the working people went hungry. In the old society, they gathered or produced food in common and received a share. They got equal shares or went hungry together. The bonds of collective labour bound them together. *That bond of the collective was destroyed by the new production relations.* Class society based on exploitation of man by man had come to stay. Still folk memories persisted. The poets who were close to the exploited working people, themselves hailing from their ranks, felt sympathy for them but could not show the way to change the state of affairs. They could only raise their voice against poverty and the hunger of their brothers, or appeal to and advise the king and the exploiting class to give the surplus grains to the poor so as to relieve their hunger. They preached equality of men's suffering when they were faced with hunger. To quote from a *Puram* poem :

To one who rules under one umbrella  
 The land surrounded by the seas and  
 To one who watches the crops keeping awake  
 Day and night in fear of wild animals,  
 The need of food is one measure and cloth is one yard.  
 Other needs are also equal.

To give to the needy is the good use of wealth.

If you wish to enjoy wealth (without giving), it will escape you.<sup>22</sup>

The equality spoken of here could not be realised in feudal society. But the poet recalls the oral traditions about the tribal past when production was by collective labour and sharing of the produce was in equal measure. In this new mode of production, the working people toiled hard and kept awake day and night to keep wild animals away from the crops ripe for harvest. But the ruler and the wealthy appro-

priated the product of the labour of the working people and did not leave them with enough to keep body and soul together. *This injustice strikes the poet.* But he could not revive the 'golden age' nor could he think of a change in which everyone would work and get an equal share as in the old tribal society. He offers an ethical precept to the wealthy. Such exhortations by many poets fell, of course, on deaf ears.

### *Contrast between the Present and the Past*

Another poet, while preaching generous gifts of food to the poor, tells a king that only generous donors of food will earn praise and that those who withhold gifts of food are those who do not realise the greatness of the old traditions of their ancestors.

Those who wanted to remain immortal in this evanescent world  
Had left their fame to survive them after their death.  
Wealthy men whom no one can approach  
Do not know the traditions and customs of their ancestors:  
For these men do not give to the needy.<sup>28</sup>

The ancestors spoken of were the tribal chiefs whom any minstrel could approach and receive gifts from. The wealthy men of the poet's age could not be approached or even seen by the common man. They departed from the time-honoured traditions and customs. From the context, the tradition can be understood to be the folk tradition of the collective sharing of food and other things.

In the two examples given above, the poets contrast the wealth and poverty existing side by side. The suffering of the poor impels them to seek a way out. They can only think of the days gone by, the memories of which are handed down from the not too distant past. It is to be noted that the poets do not call upon the wrath of heaven or punishment of gods on those who hoard and do not feel compassion for their fellowmen. They only try to cajole or reprimand the wealthy, pointing out that if they wished to earn fame, they must give; if not, they are not worthy sons of their ancestors. Fame, a mundane incentive, is dangled before the miserly rich as a bait to induce them to give away their surplus. It is obvious that the outlook of these poets is essentially materialistic.

### *Acculturation : Vedic, Buddhist and Jain*

As the thoughts of the ancient materialists faded, the growth of feudalism produced spiritualistic and idealistic thought. Just at that time, the Brahmanic thought of the early centuries of the Christian era diffused to the south with all the sacrificial rites and the subjective idealism of the Upanishads. The stories of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata also spread throughout Tamil Nadu in oral versions. A process of acculturation had begun.

Even before the arrival of Brahmin colonies, there were Jains and Buddhists living in the far south. Scholars like K A Neelakanta Sastry thought that the Brahmins were the first to immigrate to the south in the

first century A D. But recent research into the corpus of Tamil Brahmin inscriptions by I V Mahadevan has brought to light new evidence which has upset the old conclusions. Grants and aids to Jain ascetics are the themes of many of these inscriptions. Mahadevan dates a few of these inscriptions to the period between the second century B C and the first century A D.<sup>24</sup> It appears that the first contact that Tamil culture had with northern cultures was in connection with the Buddhist and Jain systems of thought.

As in the country of their birth, the conditions of social transformation in South India were ripe for absorbing these ideas. The same religions which, through their own monastic orders gave an illusory substitute to the broken bonds of unity of a detribalised people in North-Eastern India, gave the same dispensation to the detribalised people in Tamil Nadu. These religions drew numerous adherents. The Jain and Buddhist monks produced works on grammar and ethics. The first epic, *Silappadikaram*, was the work of a Jain ascetic and *Manimekalai* that of a Buddhist poet, Sathanar. The first epic is not a treatise on philosophical speculation but the story of a merchant, Kovalan, and his wife, Kannagi. But *Manimekalai* is the story of the daughter of Kovalan, the hero of the first epic, through a concubine, Madhavi. The daughter renounces the life of a courtesan and enters a Buddhist monastery. Her travels abroad are described in the epic. She meets the teachers of the various systems of philosophy then extant in Tamil Nadu and listens to expositions on *Alavai Vadam* (Mimamsa), *Saivam*, *Brahma Vadam*, *Vaishnavism*, *Veda Vadam*, *Ajeevaka Nirkanta* (Jainism) and *Bhuta Vadam* (Materialism)

The epic is considered to have been written in the third century A D. This is how the *Bhutavadin* explains his system :

When certain flowers and jaggery are boiled together, liquor is born which produces intoxication. Just as when elements combine, consciousness arises. Consciousness dissolves with the dissolution of the elements composing them like the disintegration of sound. Elements combine to produce living *Bhutas* and from them other living *Bhutas* will be born. Life and consciousness are synonymous. From non-living *Bhutas* consisting of two or more elements rise non-living *Bhutas* of the same type. *Lokayata* is a variant of this system that agrees in fundamentals with this system. Observation is the method by which knowledge is obtained. Inferential thinking is illusory. This worldly life is real. Its effect is experienced in this life only. The theory that we enjoy the fruits of our actions in our next birth or in another world is false.<sup>25</sup>

The author of an old commentary of this work distinguishes three schools of materialism from what is stated in these lines: (a) *Bhutavada*, (b) *Lokayata* and (c) *Sarvaka*.

*Bhutavadins* believe in five elements whereas *Lokayatas* and *Sarvakas* believe in only four. (They do not consider *akasa* as an element.) *Bhutavadins* classify the combination of the five elements as two types, as *Bhutas* with life and *Bhutas* without life. This classification is not accepted by *Lokayatas*.

Consciousness, according to *Lokayata*, arises out of the combination of five lifeless elements and not out of the combination of *Bhutas* with life and *Bhutas* without life. Perhaps they believed that this distinction of *Bhutas* having life and without life is contradictory to a consistent materialist explanation of the origin of life and consciousness. We are unable to know what the *Sarvakas* thought of this classification of the *Bhutas*. The *Bhutavadin* himself admits that there are variants of this system.

After listening to the exposition of *Bhutavada*, Manimekalai poses a few questions which are supposed to puncture his argument. According to the story, she knew her past as a result of a miracle in her life. She tells the materialist that she knows about her previous births. The materialist replies that hallucinations arising out of faith in gods, illusions created in dreams and the unconscious state are to be doubted: they are false. Since his reply implies that he would rely only on direct observation (*Katchi* or *Pratyaksha*), she puts him a teasing question: "How can you know who your parents are except through inference? Truth cannot be known without employing forms of reasoning not based on direct observation. Therefore, do not view such conclusions with doubt."

Manimekalai was a Buddhist. The poet of the epic was an ardent Buddhist. Buddhists rejected the ideas of materialism of whatever variety they might be. Therefore, the materialist system is stated in the epic only to be repudiated. It is evidently a distorted version to suit the needs of Buddhist theology.

Now let us turn to the presentation of the materialist case by a Jaina text. The epic, *Neelakesi*, narrates the life of an imaginary character of the same name, the heroine of the story. She was a demon converted by a Jain *Tirthankara*. She meets the teachers of all systems of philosophy and religion (just as Manimekalai did) and listens to their views. This epic comes later than *Manimekalai* and is assigned to the range, fifth to ninth century AD. The arguments of Pisachaka, the materialist teacher, are summarised in a commentary by A Chakravarthy Nayanar thus:

We do not recognise the subtle distinctions of qualities and substances. For us the ultimate realities are the five *Bhutas*. These are permanent and real. Fire, earth, water, air and space are the permanent elements of the universe. Out of these are evolved respectively eyes, nose, tongue, body and ears and with these five sense organs arise respectively colour, odour, taste, touch and sound. Just as intoxicating drink is obtained by a combination of five things, flour, jaggery etc., so also by the combination of these five elements are obtained intelligence, feelings of pleasure and pain, which characteristics increase with the increase of the five elements and disappear with the disintegration of the five elements.

When the five elements thus disintegrate, the qualities of intelligence and feeling completely disappear without leaving any residue. The fundamental realities in the world are those five elements and every activity must be traced to the efficacy of these. But clever fellows



with the gift of the gab go prattling about the existence of the *Jeeva* and their doctrine is accepted by the ignorant masses. Except sheer verbiage there is nothing corresponding to the word *Jeeva* in reality. There never was in existence in the past anything besides these five elements and in future also these will continue to exist. To postulate an entity besides these five is the result of ignorance as to the nature of ultimate reality; and the *Lokayata* teacher thus expounded his system.<sup>26</sup>

It is relevant here to consider the remarks of the old commentary on *Manimekalai* to bring out the differences in the presentation of *Bhutavada* in the two works, *Manimekalai* and *Neelakesi*. The *Bhutavadin* in *Manimekalai* states that there are two kinds of matter: lifeless matter and matter with life. He further states that life has the attribute of consciousness and body is devoid of that attribute : life originates from living matter and body from lifeless matter. *Lokayatas* do not classify matter into two types as the *Bhutavadin* in *Manimekalai* attempts to do. The *Bhutavadin* agrees with the *Lokayatas* over other fundamental categories. He mentions that there are schools of materialism differing slightly in non-essentials. In the presentation of materialism in *Neelakesi* the five elements combine directly to produce consciousness (knowledge, joy etc.), but the clusters of elements are not classified as lifeless and living.

It can be seen quite clearly that early materialist trends of thought were systematised later to answer the polemical attacks of Jainism and Buddhism. While systematisation proceeded apace, the materialists had to answer from their basic categories certain questions raised by the idealists: What is life? What is its relation to the body? How does man know the world? How can you explain consciousness from the standpoint of the five elements? What happens to life after death? Is there rebirth in this world and life in another world?

What were the answers of the materialists of Tamil Nadu to these questions? Unfortunately, no texts by materialist authors have come down to us. We have no means of knowing their views on all these questions directly from the exponents. It cannot be expected that one's opponent will present one's views objectively when the aim is to demolish them. Debi Prasad Chattopadhyaya points out the difficulties in reconstructing ancient materialism from the statements of the opponents of this system thus :

But what are the sources of our information about this materialist philosophy? Unfortunately only the writings of those who sought to refute and ridicule it. In other words, *Lokayata* is preserved for us only in the form of *Purvapaksha*, that is as represented by its opponents. Not that there never existed any actual treatises on this system. Tucci, Garve and Das Gupta have produced conclusive evidence to show that actual *Lokayata* texts were known in ancient and early medieval times.<sup>27</sup>

On the whole, these sources which are meant to repudiate materialism are valuable as they are the main sources from which we learn some-



thing of a system of Indian thought which is more ancient than any other. All sources of idealist thought agree in stating the fundamental categories of ancient Indian materialism : (1) Worldly life was real. (2) Life arose out of a material basis. (3) This material basis consisted of five elements (or four). (4) The peculiar modes of combination brought forth various forms of existence. (5) Consciousness and life are one and the same and can be traced to the five elements. (6) Reality can be known by *Pratyaksha* or direct observation. (7) The origin of knowledge is observation and inference based on observation.

On the last point there is a degree of controversy. Did the ancient materialists believe in inference at all? Or did they postulate direct observation alone as a means to knowledge?

*Manimekalai* enumerates the different systems of philosophy expounded by their different teachers and appends a note on the forms of reasoning accepted by them as leading to valid inferences. "*Lokayatas* accept only *Pratyaksha* (direct observation)." This statement is by a *Mimamsaka* philosopher who figures as a character in the epic to expound the principles of logic to Manimekalai. The old commentator notes that so far as *Lokayata* is concerned, many other logicians like Varadaraya, the author of *Tharkika Rakcha*, agree with this view, although they differ with regard to other systems.<sup>28</sup>

Can it be true that our ancient materialists accepted only observation based on sense perceptions as the source of knowledge? Did they reject the validity of deductive and inductive forms of reasoning?

From the quotations given by opponents of this system from texts supposed to have been composed by materialists, it is clear that they used both deductive and inductive forms of reasoning, but opposed fallacious inductive forms of reasoning pressed into service to prove the existence of the soul apart from the body, or the theory that there is another birth in which man will enjoy the fruits of his actions in this birth.

Dakshin Narayan Sastry throws light on how *Lokayatas* used inferential reasoning and the inductive form of reasoning and what limits they set to the validity of the two forms: "Inference is classified into two types (by *Lokayatas*). One refers to the future and the other to the past. They rejected the first and accepted the second."<sup>29</sup>

This cryptic statement can be understood by referring to Das Gupta who describes the views of Purandara, a *Lokayata* who flourished in the seventh century A D.

Purandara admits the usefulness of inference, in determining the nature of all worldly things where perceptual experience is available, but inference cannot be employed for establishing any dogma regarding the transcendental world, or life after death, or the law of Karma which cannot be available to ordinary perceptual experience.<sup>30</sup>

The inferential process should be related to material life. It should not be used to justify dogmas about the future life. Das Gupta explains Purandara's point on the basis of the comments of the Jain author,

Vasudeva Suri:

The main reason for upholding such a distinction between the validity of inference in our practical life of ordinary experience and in ascertaining transcending truths beyond experience lies in this, that an inductive generalisation is made by observing a large measure of cases of agreement in presence together with agreement in absence and no case of agreement in presence can be observed in the transcendent sphere for even if such spheres existed they could not be perceived by the senses. Thus since in the supposed suprasensuous transcendent world no case of *heth* agreeing with the presence of its *sady*s can be observed, no inductive generalisation or law of concomitance can be made relating to this sphere. Hence the *Lokayatas* maintained that there were two types of inference: (1) *Utpanna pratiti* and (2) *Utpadya pratiti*. The former meant inference about something the knowledge of which already existed, and the latter meant inference about something the knowledge of which did not exist.<sup>31</sup>

The inference of god, the next world, happiness in heaven, the result of *Yagnas* (sacrifices) were inferences of the second type. *Lokayatas* would not deny the inference of fire from the observation of smoke.

The later works of idealist systems have caricatured and distorted the real intent of *Lokayata*. Thus the works of *Saiva Siddhanta* portray a *Lokayata* as a comical hedonist who indulges himself in licentious and unfettered enjoyment of all forbidden carnal pleasures. In the *Sivagnana Didhdhiar*, text of *Saiva Siddhanta*, the following picture of a *Lokayata* is sketched:

He wore fresh odorous garlands on his chest. He spoke thus: air, earth, water, fire are the elements which combine to produce smell, taste, shape and tactile sense. The combination of these again are everlasting. Obey the king and amass wealth and enjoy yourself here on earth.<sup>32</sup>

This is nothing but pure slander.

The study of materialism from South Indian sources can be a fruitful field of research, provided highly competent scholars turn their attention to the subject. Joseph Needham<sup>33</sup> mentions that the thoughts of the early *Siddhas* of Tamil Nadu bore the imprint of materialism. Reading the texts of the poems of *Siddhas* in their present form, I found that a very large number of them are interpolations of *Saiva Siddhanthis*. A few poems dealing with the anthropomorphic origin of the world, the description of the properties of the five elements, the identification of soul with the body and the desire to prolong life in this world by *Tantric* practices deserve the attention of scholars. A few medical treatises coming down to us from the ninth century and supposed to have been written by *Siddhas* deal with proto-physiology and proto-science from a materialistic point of view. All these works abound in a good deal of idealistic chaff.

If these are sorted out and studied critically, fresh light would be thrown on the study of Indian materialism.

- 1 A C Nayanar (Ed.) *Neelakesi*, a Jain epic, Madras 1936, Introduction.
- 2 *Purananuru*, an anthology of poems of the *Sangam* period. Various editions are available, for example, one edited by V Swaminatha Iyer, Madras 1965.
- 3 S V Pillai, *Hisiory of Tamil Language and Literature*, Madras 1960.
- 4 D Chattopadhyaya, *Lokayata*, Bombay 1958.
- 5 F Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*, Moscow.
- 6 K Marx and F Engels, *German Ideology*, Moscow.
- 7 *Purananuru*, poem 239.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 191.
- 9 T N Subramanian, "Ajivikas in Thevaram" an article in the *Arunagiri Souvenir*, Isaikazhagam.
- 10 *Purananuru*, 9.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 *Ibid.*, 55. *Yavanas* are foreign merchants who are mentioned in all the *Puram* works.
- 14 D N Sastry, *Philosophical Background of Ayurveda*, chapter on *Lokayata*, Lokmipathi, (Ed.) 1936.
- 15 *Purananuru*.
- 16 *Matuiraikkanai*, lines 453-458.
- 17 D N Sastry, *op. cit.*
- 18 *Purananuru*, 9.
- 19 *Pattupattu*, Madras 1958, a *Sangam* anthology of ten poems of which *Maduraikanchi* is one.
- 20 *Purananuru*, 18.
- 21 *Manimekalai*, M V Nathan and A V Pillai (Ed.) *Saiva Siddhanta Works Publishing Society*, Tirunelveli, first edition 1946, X 90.
- 22 *Purananuru*, 189.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 167.
- 24 I V Mahadevan, *Study of Tamil Brahmin Inscriptions of the Sangam Age*, a paper submitted to the Second International Conference Seminar of Tamil Studies.
- 25 Paraphrase of the lines in *Manimekalai* by the old commentator (Translation mine).
- 26 A C Nayanar, (Ed.) *Neelakesi*, Madras 1936, English introduction.
- 27 D Chattopadhyaya, *Indian Philosophy*, Bombay 1961, p 186.
- 28 *Manimekalai*, commentary on lines about *Bhutavada*.
- 29 D N Sastry, *op. cit.*
- 30 D Chattopadhyaya, *op. cit.*, p 189.
- 31 *Ibid.*, pp 189-190.
- 32 *Sivagnana Siddhiar* (Tamil) *Saiva Siddhanta Works Publishing Society*, Tirunelveli (year not mentioned).
- 33 J Needham, *Development of Early Civilisation in China*, Cambridge, 1948. A few *Siddhas* believed that the body made of *Bhutas* can be preserved if the changes in the combination and decomposition of the *Bhutas* are controlled. A few *Siddhas* were merely rebels against organised *Saiva* religion—against caste oppression—but were theists believing in a supreme god, Siva, who could be approached without the intermediary of priesthood. They were not materialists. Later the Saivites interpolated many of their own concepts into the popular folk cults of the *Siddhas*. The extant work, known as *Siddhar Padalgai*, is a heterogeneous mixture of all these trends. No edition is free from interpolations. A deep study of this work and of the medical works of *Siddha* physicians may reveal materialist elements in their thought.